time she was trying to think clearly. Could it be possible that Signor Vecchio was, in fact, blackmailing him? On what grounds could he do so?

It was then that Enrico, aware in his childlike way of the tension in the room, ran to Luella and put his hand in hers. " 'Rico wanna go 'way," he said. "Not lika thees beeg house."

The Duke turned round. "You are quite right," he said, "and it does not like you!" He walked towards Luella and said: "Leave immediately and take the child with you. Go back to where you came from. I will see my solicitors tomorrow." He spoke in such a curt manner that it seemed to Luella that every word cut like a whip.

"I . . I am . . afraid," she said in a small voice, "that it is . . impossible for me . . to leave. The courier who . . brought us here . . has already . . driven away."

"I suppose that was on your instructions," the Duke said in the same tone of voice.

"Certainly not!" Luella protested. "I intended to return to London with him as soon as I had handed over your son to you, as I was requested to do."

"Stop calling him my son!" the Duke ordered. "Does he look like my son? I have never had a son and, I assure you, I have never been married!"

"But . . but Signor Vecchio told me . . that your wife . . whose name was Tia . . had died recently . . and he said that . . as the child was . . yours . . he must join you in . . England and . . take up his . . rightful place." She stumbled over the words, feeling even as she spoke them that they sounded wrong.

"Do you really think that if I had a son he would

look like that?" the Duke asked. "Try and get it into your stupid, scheming head that I have never been married and what we have here is a clever attempt at blackmail!"

"But how . . I do not see . . how?" Luella cried.

"Do not play the innocent with me!" the Duke said sharply. "You are part of this plot, and I have no intention of having anything further to do with you. My solicitors will deal with this. All you have to do is to get out – and quickly!"

"But I cannot do that," Luella gasped. "As I have just said . . it is impossible . . unless you will be kind enough to . . send me in one of your . . carriages."

"I presume you can walk!" the Duke said coldly.

Luella stared at him as if she could hardly believe what she was hearing was true and that he meant what he said.

He looked down again at the paper he held in his hand. "Go back to Vecchio," he said, "and tell him that I will fight him in every court in the country rather than succumb to his filthy tricks."

He stopped speaking to scowl at her, and then went on: "You can also tell him I am well aware that he chose you for your looks, but I am not interested in women of your sort! You should have stayed on the streets where you belong!"

Luella realised how insulting his words were. At the same time, because he was speaking quietly and bitterly, rather than shouting at her, they seemed all the more horrible.

Enrico, who was sensitive, was aware that something unpleasant was happening. He moved closer to